**English 11/12 Honors: Tolkien Name:**

**Mr. Fisher**

**Beowulf: Language**

English is divided into three periods: Old English (ca. 449-1100), Middle English (ca. 1100-1500), and Modern English (ca. 1500-). While many people think of Shakespeare's English as old, Shakespeare wrote and spoke Modern English, albeit, an early form of it. Chaucer's poetry, including his most famous work, The Canterbury Tales, are a good examples of Middle English poetry. Beowulf, which probably dates to some time between 700 – 1000 CE, is an Old English poem. Old English is sometimes known as AngloSaxon.

It would be wrong to believe that the English language just changed from Old English to Middle English in 1100 and from Middle English to Modern English in 1500. These shifts took place over hundreds of years. It is important to realize that the wide-spread notion of a standard language or even of standardized spelling are modern notions only made possible by the printing press. Not only did the printing press made wide-scale distribution possible, it provided the ability to fix language in time on a grand scale, thereby slowing down the process of language change.

However, while English was always changing, the dates 1100 CE and 1500 CE, while approximate, are significant for the English language. Although major grammatical and phonetic changes took place throughout the Old English period, the Norman invasion of 1066 and its resulting influx of French words into the language meant that the English of 1100 was much more different from the English of 1000 than the differences between the English of 900 and the English of 1000. Likewise, while English underwent a number of grammatical and phonetic changes throughout the Middle English period, the fifteenth century saw such a radical change in the pronunciation of English that 1500 serves as a useful date for the shift from Middle to Modern English.

Old English makes use of unfamiliar letters, most of which derive from the runic alphabet, an alphabet used by the Germanic peoples. These letters are “þ” (thorn) and "ð" (eth) (often used interchangeably to represent the "th" sound of "that" and "thin"), “æ" (ash) (the vowel sound in cat), and wyn, which represents "w" and is rarely used in modern editions of ld English texts. If you look at a picture of the first page of Beowulf, you can see two capital wyns in the first line. They are the second and fifth letters: "H[wyn]ÆT [wyn]E GARDE." When looking at the manuscript page, you'll also notice one additional unfamiliar looking letter, "ꝣ" which is the letter "g."

While Old English can look quite foreign at first glance, it can also look and sound surprisingly modern when one knows a few basics. Consider, for instance, the sentence, “þæt wæs god cyning,” which is repeated multiple times in Beowulf. “þ” represents a "th" sound. “æ” is the "a" in cat, and the "o" in god is pronounced just as if you were saying "go" but holding the "o" a little bit longer than you normally would. Knowing this, it is not hard to recognize the first three words as "That was good." While that last word may be a little more difficult, it is still recognizable. The "c" in cyning is pronounced as a "k" and the word itself is pronounced just as if you were adding a "ing" to the word "kin" (kin + ing). Once you know how to pronounce cyning, it is not a stretch to see how the pronunciation of the Old English word could have simplified to our modern day "king." Putting all this together, we can now recognize that Old English sentence to be our Modern English sentence "That was [a] good king."